

LOOKING FOR WORDS AFTER “THE END”

By

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis directed by Professor Melanie Yazzie

In this thesis, I work to describe the fraught relationship between myself and my parents. Using symbols to represent emotions, people, and moments, I have developed a visual language to discuss the trauma of domestic violence, emotional therapy, and loss. Each character as presented in my thesis is a manifestation of memories and thus is represented by a symbol; for example, the bear represents my mom, the rabbit myself, and so on. Much like the stories I was read in my youth, the narrative I am depicting is a means of coping with emotional stressors. I explore my own narrative and plot points within my life that make it comical, feared, and treasured all at once. I am in search for what is next in my narrative by revisiting and settling with a past I don't pay enough respect to.

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Preface

It began with a rabbit. My hometown of Lafayette, Colorado, was full of them and it felt like home when I saw them. A child's imagination is something to admire; I would often imagine the rabbits taking over and forcing the humans out of their homes to live in small burrows much like the rabbits. Like a micro uprising, the rabbits felt strong and prepared. Being strong and prepared was something I wished to be as I grew up around my own set of problems.

It devastated me the day I saw the first dead rabbit my stepfather shot. It screamed once, immediately quieted and began to keep moving. The little rabbit didn't quit even with the small dime size BB pellet that paralyzed its small body. It dragged itself with every drop of life it had across the street, desperately trying to separate itself from the hunter and come closer to a family that it would never see again. There is always a hunter and the hunted. In this work, I continue to explore the fact that there must always be a dynamic relationship between the surrounding environment and the people, animals and objects that operate within it, which meant I had to develop my counter parts in the stylized version of my narrative.

Next came the bear. I chose the bear for my mom because she always would yell the loudest but, in the end, would be the most afraid. She was fragile and frail; I thought she would break. She was never braver than when she was fighting for

her children- for me and my brothers. I'm not sure she appreciated it, but I would like to think she had a secret understanding that the idea of a "momma bear" was a title made entirely for her existence. She was my soul mate and the only person who I felt would always be my protector of my feelings, my being, and my history. I survived because of her.

My mom passed away February 22nd, 2022 even though I know she was trying so hard to keep fighting. This is for you, Momma. It's hard to breathe without you, and I am desperately looking for the words that come after "the end" for us.

Chapter 1: Visual Symbols and their Effects

To begin understanding my work, being able to decipher the language it speaks is important. Storytelling is an integral part of human history and human culture. The idea of sharing stories resonates with the medium of printmaking and its capability to make multiples. Much of my research while in the MFA program was focused around learning the stories of the contemporary artists I surrounded myself with and inviting them to collaborate in various ways. Part of that experience included creating my own printmaking conference during the pandemic called *Western Wilds Collective* and organizing print exchanges and projects dealing with domestic abuse such as *Put a Pin In It* and *Domestic Dedication*. In each of these projects, participating artists were asked to create work reflecting on the themes I address in this thesis paper and throughout my work. It has been a beautiful experience focusing on my community during the last couple of years. It shaped my work and professional life as an artist in more ways than just creating work around my own experiences in isolation. The stories of others and being around my family gave me the power to feel safe in exposing parts I once ignored and pretended didn't exist. Stories are everything in the artwork I create and surround myself with because in our truths, these stories can be educational, emotional, and inspiring.

I was lucky enough to have a mom and a father who prioritized reading and bought me as many books as I could've ever wanted, so I was always filled with imaginative landscapes the books inspired. As I got older and the stories matured, the same imaginal phenomena applied, which is in large part how this work came to be. Frequently, stories are rough translations of reality; the narrative scenes that make up this thesis work are translations of my experiences past, present, and future. I assign a symbol or metaphor to the people, places, and things that represent the important and significant events of my own history.

Before the Rabbit

Before the rabbit, my work focused on more direct self-portraiture. Many of my earlier works were self-portraits because of my deep fascination with the idea of self. The motivation for self examination came from a lack of understanding my own place and identity in this world. After spending much of my undergraduate experience in psychology, learning about what makes up personality affected my work. I didn't understand why my past had to be mine or why I had no control over my present mental health. I had been raised with the notion that showing emotions was a weakness and letting someone know that you're not okay was unacceptable.

My thesis work reflects myself; a combination of my time in my early academic career researching psychology and anthropology as well as my recent

focus of researching childhood trauma. Combining previous studies and self-reflection, my work began to utilize symbolic metaphors instead of literal depictions. What some might call a breakthrough, but I call a deeper understanding, occurred when I made a print several years ago that had been a traditional self-portrait, but included the image of rabbits running along my face. My mouth had been gagged, silencing any form of opinion or feelings. I had felt for a very long time that the secrets and the lies that filled my life were overwhelming, and I wasn't allowed to have an opinion or a story. That was the first work that showed a path forward toward my current thesis work.



Figure 1: *The Only Sound a Rabbit Makes*,
Lithograph, 2019

The Rabbit

As I wrote earlier, my relationship with rabbits started early on with my experience of watching rabbits jump from pain as they got shot with BB pellets. The resilience of the rabbit often surprised me, but what surprised me more was watching my strong mom avoid looking at them, knowing that her husband had ended a life. I think it was this avoidance that piqued my interest. I had wished many times I could be invisible, as rabbits become in the tall grass of their surroundings, during the war my mom and father waged on one another. The

anxiousness that the rabbit feels as it sinks down in the grass to avoid danger was what I felt anytime they were near or speaking about one another. The two of them loathed each other so much, it was hard for me to believe that they loved or respected each other enough to get married and divorced on three different occasions. I could tell they knew each other well, because they both knew the exact pressure points to push to upset the other. Being married now, I understand more of the underrated power wielded by each person in a coupling. I have been there for my husband's best and worst moments, and I walk each day with an atomic bomb ready to detonate if I so choose. While I can't imagine reaching a point where I would want to destroy my husband with words that would hurt him to his core, it's something I can look back on and realize my parents were both hurt and always on the defensive because of me. They continually used the barrage of weaponry each of them obtained through years of combat against one another. While it was devastating to both parties, they ignored the nuclear deterrent being me, and because they were always fighting over me, I was the one who often suffered the worst of their war.

Perhaps after all these years I should feel honored, but outside of the fighting, my relationships with each of them were very different. When they spoke ill of each other, each of their attacks towards one another were meant to have a different effect. My mom would speak horribly of my dad, but it felt like a

warning. When my dad spoke, it felt like the words were venom intended to poison her when I told her what he said. I felt early on in my life that I had to be able to read through lies. Because of this, I quickly learned that I was living different lives every day, and I began to lie. I lied to them, to my friends, and to me because I needed to put up a façade. I wore a mask that was intricate, delicate, and had the Mardi Gras jester design painted to make sure that my joy was shared with others. There were stretches of years of my life after my lies began that I can't remember because I was beyond depression and anxiety that I felt nothing. I grew up too fast. I would never wish my experience on another person, including any children I would ever have. I was loved, but the way in which I was loved felt like I was being ignored, abused, and neglected because I was buried in a relationship that my parents couldn't end because they had me. I wanted nothing more than to be an invisible rabbit hiding in the grass, but instead I was a rabbit standing with my back against the glass as onlookers ignored the poison corrupting my brain.

The Bear

My mom has always been involved in the formative shaping of who I am as a person, and she was my best friend. Navigating through lies was always a challenge, and while I know for a fact that my mom was a liar, I also came to believe that there was some logical and excellent reason she lied to me so much.

My father's lies were malicious to enrage her and hurt her as well as myself in the process, but I would like to think her only intention behind the lies was to protect me. Despite her lies, she was the person I would always want to go to when something good, bad, or anywhere in between occurred. She was my joy and my sorrow all at once.

I have always loved poetry, and she gave me the books I have loved the most, starting with Shel Silverstein. Any young reader can benefit from his words because the way he writes makes everything about growing up and maintaining childlike innocence acceptable. There's one poem from his books that has always stayed with me, especially as I began to work through the imagery in this thesis:

Turning Into
Swingin' from
A hick'ry bough
I felt so brave
I hollered... WOW

But down I fell
Just like a bomb.
And I heard my "wow"
Turn into... MOM¹

My mom was the manifestation and epitome of my comfort zone. I liked to pretend I didn't need her as much as she needed me, but it simply wasn't true. The first print I made with my mom as the bear was entitled *After Our Storm* because it

¹ Silverstein, S. (2006) *Falling Up*. HarperCollins Children's Book

was meant to be a depiction of the two of us after a battle we fought; we had each other, and we would come together. The bear and the rabbit lay together in the bed

my grandma gave me with

white wrought iron details.

The bear is protective, but also

fragile. Mother bears often

react in anger when feeling

threatened and that was

absolutely my mom to an



Figure 2: *After Our Storm*, Lithograph, 2021

absolute degree. She was quick to get upset, especially in regard to her children,

but behind the aggressive, sharp-tongued demeanor, was someone so weak and

broken. She overcame many things in life but the physical and emotional damage

left bumpy, white raised scars. The bruises healed but my mom spent years

repairing the broken teeth my father caused. At nights she would drink herself into

a state just to be able to sleep, otherwise she would lay awake fearing the days to

come. She held onto me desperately trying to protect me from the same wounds,

but when she couldn't, the scarring continued. I imagine that underneath this

bear's fur is a body ridden with wounds and the hair is a protective blanket much

like my mom used her own hair for and inside the bear's mind is nothing but worry

for a future she didn't want for her children.

The Hunter

The last figure that makes an unwelcome appearance in my work is my father. Because of his actions, my own trauma often prevented me from discussing him in my work because it brought to light times from my youth that I hated. Despite this, there was a sense of honesty I wanted to hold myself to, and by doing so he became a part of the work.

While most of my symbology involves people disguised in animal form, I didn't think he deserved the same. He is the villain of my narrative, which has only been exacerbated by time. I often felt that it's the fathers role to always look out for their own and he frankly did not. I had to learn to take hold of my own situation from such an early age and I have often felt that my childhood was robbed because of his actions. While my father is a calmer, slimmed down and more delicate version of himself now, that doesn't stop the memory of him being ugly and overwhelming in size. His fake, repulsive grin haunts any positive shared memories because wears charm like a perfume: covering up the his nasty and wicked existence. When I think of him, I think of the looming figure that stood in front me, attempting to intimidate me with violence. While I will discuss him more in the pages to come, the largest part of his role in this work is the rise of my own strength and resilience, not the representation of the pitiful nature of my youth and all its challenges.

Other Figures and Places

Creating storybook narratives came with the need to represent other figures that I am continually developing as an artist and have only begun manifesting through this body of work.

Some of these symbols seen in several pieces are the hawk and the dog. The dog is based off my dear little dog, Bazille. Bazille is a feisty pup with a lot of



Figure 3: *My protector*, Lithograph, 2022

personality to go along with the might of his 11-pound body. Though I've had many dogs through the years, no other pup has stuck out like Bazille has. He's the first to warn if he feels threatened by even the measliest of leaves up to the common passerby and

he is increasingly more aggressive about who he allows next to me in his home. I call him my shadow because I feel comfort knowing that this small animal is always right behind me and keeping an eye out for me. He is a representation of protection because while he's always on the defensive, I can tell he needs me to comfort him too after he scares the leaves and the people away with his toothy growl. In this print, *My protector*, I depict the two in combat, based off an experience of fearing for my own dog's life as he was trying to ward the hunters

off from coming into his territory. The hawks continued to perch and watch Bazille, waiting for him to forget their presence so they could steal him from me. In that moment, I saw the correlation of the hawk with my own fear because I had no control over the hawk, but I knew that I would lunge, risking my eyes being scratched out to protect that small dog, knowing that he would do the same for me.



Figure 4: Image taken in Firestone, Colorado from my backyard, 2022

Some of the other significant symbols seen in my work are based on the locations of the events taking place, primarily in the field and surrounding area behind my home I purchased with my husband. Something I lacked in my youth was control over place, space, and time as I was at the mercy of my parent's as all children are. My belongings, pets, friends, even movies were split between homes

and cities. When I was able to gain control of my life, I decided I would never be at the mercy of others' lives again. The home I bought with my husband is the first place that I feel is mine and that I have absolute control over. Because of this, the fields, meadows, and prairies I see every day are much of the inspiration that I will discuss in more detail to come. My work is discreetly tied to land just as much as it is tied to my family and its history. I want to pay respect to how much the land I exist on has given me in creating solace and peace in my life.

Chapter 2: Storybooks from Another Lifetime

Before “The End”

I've often felt disassociated to the memories that live deep in the psyche of my mind. I've lived a thousand lifetimes in the span of twenty-five years because I'm living with the flashbulb moments my brain documents. “Flashbulb memory” refers to the idea that emotional moments or news create a mental snapshot of the specific surroundings in which the event occurred². Often these memories are not pristine; they can be recalled incorrectly or distorted due to the passage of time.

Traumatic events and news playing much like a damaged film reel.

Remaining are the events existing in my memory as tales of another life I shared

² Perera, A. (2021, March 03). “Flashbulb Memory.” *Simply Psychology*

with others, rather than feeling like the life I'm living is connected to the younger version of myself. This translates through my work in a way that I almost have to remind myself that events happened and that this is reality. I sometimes think I only began making art in the first place because I wanted to remind myself that these moments were real.

The first of these moments I address in more detail is *In Defense of You*.

This piece was directly reflecting on the bitter war between my parents that continually fueled hate in my life. I was always in the middle of their angry words



Figure 5: *In Defense of You*, Lithograph, 2022

towards one another, and I tried my hardest in the end to always protect my mom, but my dad's anger always cut her far deeper than I knew. My mom was diagnosed with Stage 4

Lymphoma cancer in 2018, and

it was going to be with her until her bitter end; it was something she was going to have to be treated for the rest of her life. When we found out, it was a time filled with anger and resentment at whatever higher power we were screaming towards in the moment. She had lived her life in fear of the men she kept choosing that existed like a metaphorical cancer, and was living with constant physical and

emotional trauma that would never go away. She had always been weakened by the men in her life, and now there was a literal cancer ravaging parts of her body and a series of toxic chemicals ripping through what was left.

I have always wanted nothing more than to protect my mom. It may have come from an unhealthy codependency on one another, but no amount of therapy could shake how anxious I felt when my mom was in pain. It may have been never-ending gaslighting³ behavior from my mom that caused me to feel guilty if I ever misbehaved or became too independent from her. Either way, it became very apparent as I got older that my mom had the belief that it was just her and I against the world. She suffered from depression that left her drunk and incapacitated to the point where I would hold her when she would weep, and she would hold me when I would lose control of my own emotions, as rare as it was. We were each other's security, and it was all we ever needed.

As I discussed in figure 2 of the piece *After Our Storm*, this work reflects the relationship we shared, where the main comfort I felt was being intertwined with her. When I was very young and prior to my mom meeting my stepdad, we had a time where my aunt, my brother, my mom, and I were living in what my mother and I called the princess tower house. As a child, I could swear that there were a hundred floors to the house, and my mom and I shared the very tip top in the tower

³ Gordon, S. (2022, January 05). "What is Gaslighting?" *VeryWell Mind*

of it. She would read me *The Paper Bag Princess*⁴ It's a story about a princess who saved the prince and dumped him in the same day when he expected her to change for him and I remember particularly liking her calling Prince Ronald a bum at the end of it. Living in the princess towers was one of my happiest times because we were safe in the comfort of my mom's bed. In the storybook version I have created, we lay on the bed my grandma bought for me to sleep on when I stayed over for the night.



Figure 6: *Ritual*, Lithograph, 2022

The wrought iron bed represents my mother's mother wrapping us together long after she left this world. My grandma would tell me stories when I was younger in this bed before sleep. My grandma would take care of me when I was sick and my mom would have to work in this bed. It is in this bed that my mom comforted me endlessly until I moved out. There was a habitual comfort in our relationship that came out through stories, night routines, and hair. While I will discuss the importance of hair to come, the piece *Ritual*, reflects our continued closeness even with my disdain for having my long hair brushed. I was notorious for only

⁴ Munsch, R. (1981). *The Paper Bag Princess*, Annick Press

brushing the front of my hair and ignoring the rats' nest on the back of my scalp. My mom was great at being a mom and I often didn't give her enough credit on how annoying I was to take care of, especially with my flair for the dramatics.

As a child, there was difficulty with having divorced parents in that one house was a home and the other place that I dreaded. Due to my age and a court controlling my life, I was forced to spend half of my life in a bedroom that didn't feel like mine, in a house that didn't smell like my mom. I spent years writing letters to my parents' mediator to somehow rid me of my unwanted contact with my father, pleading that I would be able to stay with my mom full time because it felt unnatural to sleep within the confines of my father's house. In all of that time however, I was always terrified of telling my father what I wanted even if I had written it for a court to read out loud. He was frightening, and the stories I learned from my mom about him only terrified me more. I remember I would only tell him dire news when we were within walking distance of my house in case I needed to roll out of the car and run. That might have been partially my overactive imagination, but it felt real.

When I was in eighth grade, I think I felt braver than I was. For years I allowed him to terrify me and did nothing because I had a need to please others, so I was always facing an internal war. I was brave one day going to school to tell him my thoughts, which inspired the diptych, *When The Rabbit Gets the Gun II*. I

was patient and waited until we were within walking distance of my mom's house,

my true home, but I

remember how fast

my heart was

beating, and how

paralyzed I felt

knowing I was

about to drop a

bomb into his lap.

It was that day I

said I didn't want

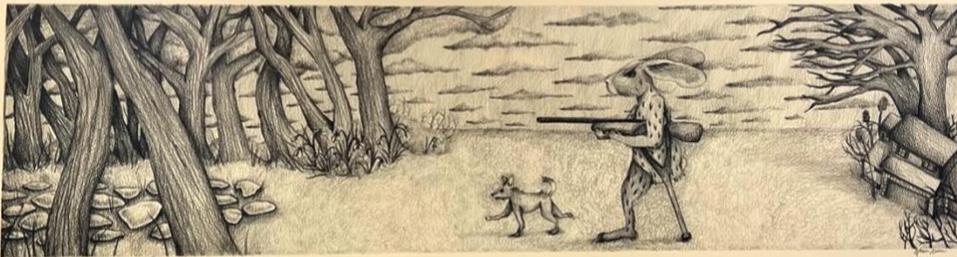


Figure 7: *When The Rabbit Gets the Gun II*, Lithograph, 2022

to visit him and that it was my choice when I did visit. His face turned purple and he immediately started screaming. I was pondering how much it would hurt to roll out of a car going 60 miles per hour down the road; my large binder was clutched to my chest and I had looped my backpack through my leg so nothing would get left behind. He yelled for ten minutes about my mom, about me, about the courts, about my mom, about me, it went on and on for what felt like eternity in the span of five minutes. I didn't yield, and it was the first time in my life I demanded to be heard as an individual. This was the moment I realized that my youth never existed in the same ways as others because I yelled back. I told him that he was not the

person that he pretended to be and I remembered everything and every moment when he made it clear he would never put me first. He had chosen his new wife, his new step-child, his new life and put me at the bottom of his list. It was the first time I took back my life, and it was horrible. In this image, I have an interpreted version of this moment as well as the many similar moments that subsequently occurred. Gaining control of my life after making the realization that I no longer needed to feel weighed down by him was both terrifying and cathartic. Rabbits hang on a clothes line for all of the specific moments that live in my mind as flashbulb memories that he chose someone else over me. I wanted to lay the memories to rest so they would quit haunting me and everything I do. The rabbit takes the gun in hand to retrieve its life for the first time and I show this through the need for the rabbit to get its lucky foot back. The visual is shown by the rabbit foot hanging off of his fat, ugly body as the hunter stands in front of a row of trapped and killed rabbits that the will be able to free at last from the underserving hunter. My mom tried to free me for so long, but it wasn't in her power- it was in mine.

The In Between

I miss my mom. She took care of me better than I ever could myself and I did my best to take care of her, but it would never be on the same level she achieved. When I made this image, she was still alive, and she needed me far more

than I thought she ever would. She had been sick with COVID-19 at this point for almost a month and I hadn't heard much from her except for a few phone calls when she would answer twice a week. I spoke to my stepdad but he said nothing that would indicate her condition. It took weeks for him to even tell me she wasn't eating or drinking or moving, and he had been contemplating taking her to the hospital.

When I showed up to her apartment that night, she was unable to breath, walk, talk, or stay awake. She was soiled, starving, dehydrated— a devastating vision. I brought her hot and sour soup because that's all she wanted and convinced her to take a bath. I had to help her walk to the bath, because she could only take two steps before she would be on the verge of passing out. She rested in the bathtub for half an hour, and I spent the whole time ensuring every inch of her was continually covered with warm water.

My mom had always loved baths. I remember in elementary school the days when she felt overly exhausted she would always draw herself a bubble bath with wine. She loved her baths extra hot and would have my stepdad heat water on the stove. I didn't have to help but I loved feeling needed as I carried the hot water from the kettle on the stove to pour into her bath. This simple task was an important memory. I watched someone who I thought exuded endless strength

despite being riddled with a life of cancer experiencing their weakest point because of a virus

So I washed my mom's hair, as she had done for me a thousand times over. She told me she hated the smell of her shampoo, but it couldn't be helped now



Figure 8: *When Roles Reverse*, Lithograph, 2022

because she would never waste intentionally. I continually doused her again and again with hot water, trying to coax her out of the bath to eat the soup she had wanted so bad, but she looked so content. She was warm for the first time in weeks

because her lack of oxygen made her toes, fingers, and nose blue. I was worried—obviously her condition was alarming because our roles had truly reversed for the first time. *When Roles Reversed*, shown on the left, was the first print I have ever made that my mom would never see.

It took my stepdad and I standing in the tub to pull her out of her comfort place and to dress her because she couldn't breath and was left gasping for air. I would later that night find out her lungs were barely functioning and doing less than half the job they needed to. We got her back in bed because she had been adamant that she didn't need the hospital. So I told her I would do her hair.

Her hair was clean and fresh as I brushed it with the oils we both used in our long hair. Our hair has always been a significant portion of our relationship, even including my brother as well. Each of us had drastically different colors, but the curls were the same and it was a beautiful part of what the three of us shared.

The day my mom died, we ate lasagna and I braided the curled hair on my brother's head and then proceeded to cut all of his hair off. My brother had been growing his hair out for years, perhaps out of spite to the social norms around him, but he had gotten to the point where it became a comfort for him and our mom loved his hair so he enjoyed it. Culturally speaking, it's not unknown that hair is tied to power across many different groups of people and to each of us and our own microculture, our hair holds the same significance⁵.

Years before this moment of cutting my brother's four braids from his head in my kitchen, an agreement unbeknownst to me was made between my brother and mom. After battling with cancer for years, it wasn't a question of when she would be gone, instead it was how many moments we had left. She wanted her ashes to be spread with both of my brothers, presuming I would be responsible for their ashes so they could be together again. But my brother wanted to operate independently and wanted her to have something considered to be precious. He told our mom he would shave his head and have the braids cremated with her so

⁵ Synnott, A. (1987). Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 38(3), 381-413.

that a piece of him could be spread now with our mom and brother's ashes. My brother, Bobby, died many years before I even existed and now our mom was gone too. I shaved off four braids for my brother and it felt like an end to something for the four of us. This event was the inspiration for my image, *Four Braids*. So as the rabbit sits in the middle of the collapsing braids about to catch fire from the falling matches, there's sorrow in the unknown of how to escape being wrapped up in the middle of loss.



Figure 3: *Four Braids*, Lithograph, 2022

There's something to shared trauma that brings comfort when you know someone feels the same pain you do, and my mom and my brother experienced more than I can understand. My brother feels the guilt of survival as him and Bobby had almost drowned together and my mother felt the remorse of feeling like a failure even though it wasn't her fault. Together, they were in a bubble that no one else would understand and they carried the weight of Bobby's existence when no one else could. I didn't realize until recently how close my brother was to our mother, mostly because I knew I occupied most of her time so I wasn't sure how any time went to him at all. It's almost like I can see him now for what is beneath

the tough exterior to see how broken he is too. I have always adored my brother, but this new closeness with my sibling feels new and good because we know that we were the beings that kept her heart beating, her lungs breathing, and her soul strong.

I shaved his hair off that day. He looked as he had when he was once in the army and we both cried and clutched the foot long braids and ate lasagna, a recipe usually saved in our family for death. As we baked it and shared the moment, I think we both knew that we are stronger together. I will say that my mom's lasagna is always going to be far superior.

Chapter 3: Conclusion and Words That Come After “The End”

There's a significant challenge in the term “the end” that leaves a feeling of loss and longing for more. When finishing a great book, a series of movies, or summing up the themes of a body of work, there's a desperation in the need to absorb more. Any great story has an end. I just didn't think that a chapter of my life would be ending in such a manner, leaving way for a new beginning. I cling on to every desperate piece I can of my mom, including the voicemails she left me at different points in time. While completing much of this work, I found myself desperate to speak with her and show her my progress. Being able to hear her

voice gave me a false sense of reality as if we had been playing phone tag and I kept missing her call. There is one voicemail I listen to more than others and it's

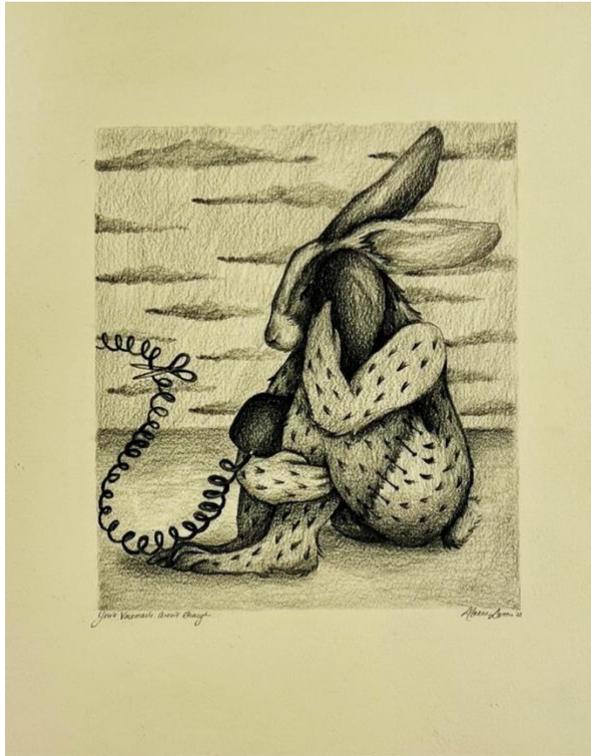


Figure 10: *Your Voicemail Isn't Enough*, Lithograph, 2022

her simply telling me that I must be busy which is why I didn't answer the phone and that she has an appointment at 3:00 pm that day. In a way I think it feels the most normal, as if I am going to hear from her after her appointment. Reflecting on this in combination with the fact that I would never hear from her the weeks before her passing, I created *Your Voicemail Isn't Enough*. The rabbit is on the way to healing having recovered its lost limb, but then the line has been cut much like how I felt as I desperately tried to contact my mom the weeks prior to her death. Her voice brought stability and making her laugh felt like I reached the highest achievement. The severance from her, especially as she was only kept alive by machines caused me to reflect on what it was I enjoyed most from our

moments. From that brought about *When the Music Stops*. My first experience with a piano was a dated keyboard my grandma would play when she was younger, and upon my interest in music, was gifted to me. It broke quickly once I began playing more and more, and I was limited to half the number of keys as a real piano, so my mom surprised me one day with the piano of my dreams. I



Figure 11: *When the Music Stops*, Colored Pencil Drawing, 2022

would practice every day on that piano because I wanted to learn how to play all the songs my mom loved. She would often record the songs I was playing and singing to eventually listen to while I was away from her. I think she liked the idea of always having a personal concert just for her at the touch of a play button. When I eventually moved out from my home, she bought herself a piano and was forcing herself to learn what I did. I think it was just another part of how we were trying to stay connected.

I arrived at the hospital on February 22nd knowing that day would be my last seeing her existing in front of me. Music had been a beautiful part of our relationship, with us belting in the car over the years and our shared love of the piano. While I couldn't bring a piano with me because of how many machines

lived in the room with her keeping her alive, I did bring headphones. My brother was convinced she could still hear us and as a person who is terrified of dying, I decided to play her favorite songs as she took her last breaths. From Leanne Rimes to Frank Sinatra, to the song my mom and stepdad danced to at their wedding, then to me singing my favorite Elvis Presley songs. She had been terrified when I brought her to the hospital, the same one both of her parents passed away in, and the many beeps and sounds from doctors did nothing to coax her. As the rabbit version of me lit the piano on fire, I think of Frida Kahlo's, *The Dream (The Bed)*, with Kahlo's acceptance of death after suffering for so long and using the imagery of a skeleton with a bomb rigged ready to explode; the music stopping for my mom but knowing that a part of me is going with her as it ends. The dry environment of the rabbit's land is ready to catch fire much as fires in the dry heat of Colorado do and there's a sense of contemplation on whether to allow the fire to worsen by using another match, or if it's time to flee and continue to live its life.

I named my thesis after my need for what comes after the end, because I am at a loss for how to function and keep going emotionally after watching my best friend decay in front of my eyes. The works for this installation are not meant to be in chronological order, much as memories come crashing through the psyche. Each stands as an individual story, yet as a whole collection of works tells of a life

of perseverance and defeat. Much like in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*⁶, my work depicts a darker story where the princess isn't saved, the hero doesn't arrive, and the children get eaten. The works are simply the moments captured in space reflecting on defining choices and moments in my life up to this point which feel as if they are a grand tale of adventure that went awry. I'm left with the desperate thoughts of regret and wishing I did something different so I didn't have to lose my mom while also being appreciative of the moments I shared with her. When devising the imagery and this language, I thought a lot about what symbols my mom would choose and if they would not only speak for me, but instead for us and our relationship. I look forward in many ways to the viewers being able to move back and forth through the pieces to catch the nuances of the language I have created. These visual narratives contain shared symbols giving reference to the points of contention within my work for the difficult moments of my life. I continued my education at

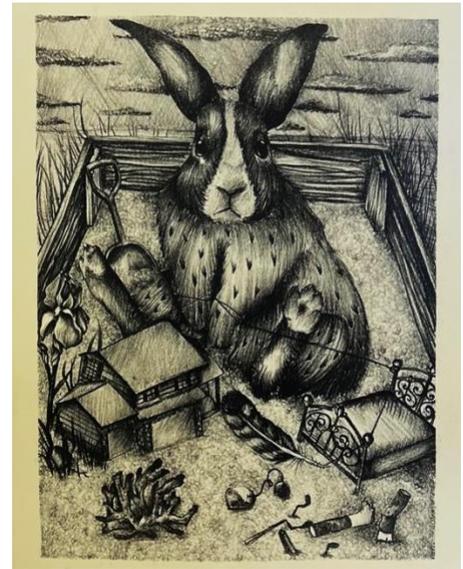


Figure 12: *What I see in the sandbox*, Lithograph, 2022

the University of Colorado for my research because my story with my family is an important part to my purpose for making work. I was allowed to reflect on the components of my family that gave me strength and when I created, *What I see in*

⁶ Grimm, J., Grimm, W., Zipes, J., & Gruella, J. (1988). *The complete fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm*.

the sandbox, I thought a lot about Frida Kahlo's, *What I saw in the water*. She was said to have described her work as describing the passage of time, reflecting on childhood games while in the bath and the sadness that still played a part in life and had an effect⁷. Many of the symbols in my sandbox are used through my work to show home, family members, mentors, and the sadness that rests with times existence. As my research ends in my program, so ends a significant part of my story now to begin being told in a new and evolved way. The work when displayed each represent a component of the story I've lived thus far and when it is viewed, I hope what's seen is nothing but the anguish, resilience, and fear that exists with times that continue changing. The stories matter to me and that is why I wanted to utilize this writing to express my own narrative, however to the viewer I want nothing more than an understanding to be made that grief and loss are something each of us feel and encounter. While we try to hide from it, we must face it head on because it's important to remember the good, bad, and everything in between in life.

Through this work and my future imagery, I want to keep the narrative we shared together alive because my mom is, and always will be, the person I make artwork for. This work is far from over but a beginning to a new story using the gift of life she gave me. She fought so hard for me every day of my life and that's

⁷ Kettenmann, Andrea. *Frida Kahlo, 1097-1954: Pain and Passion*. Köln :Benedikt Taschen, 2000.

something I will always want to cherish when I continue to include her in my life through artwork. I made this work because the relationship I had with my mom was something I cherish above all else. I would like to think everyone can share in that relationship and remember to never feel alone, even when the terror of change surrounds us.

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